



## **Blackstone, A Biographical Sketch**

By Daniel Waldron

Blackstone the Magician was born Henry Boughton on September 27, 1885, in Chicago, Illinois, a son of Barbara and Alfred Boughton. He was known as "Harry" all his life.

His love of performing showed itself early when, as a child, he emulated traveling entertainers with backyard performances of his own. At age thirteen he saw a presentation by Kellar, the leading magician of the day, and his life's ambition was set.

Shortly before young Harry's fifteenth birthday his father died, leaving a family which now included seven boys. Harry found employment at a woodworking shop; where one of the orders he handled called for construction of some conjuring apparatus, he made a replica for himself, and thereafter practiced and performed in off-hours while still working at other jobs.

By 1905 he and his younger brother, Pete, were doing magic shows in and around Chicago. By 1910 they'd dropped the "gh" from their name and taken to the road with a vaudeville act known as "Harry Bouton and Company in 'Straight and Crooked Magic'." Harry did a trick straight; Pete followed with a comical burlesque. Through decades of trouping Pete was rarely absent from Harry's side as fellow performer, backstage wonder-worker, master mechanic, trusted confidant, and bulwark of inestimable strength.

Harry's consuming dream was to have a big illusion show and from 1913 onward he began to make it a reality. He took on a new name--Fredrik the Great--selecting it simply because it happened to be one printed on a quantity of magician's unused advertising lithos which the hard-pressed young performer could buy for next to nothing. Once the United States entered World War 1, however, anti-German sentiment caused him to search for a less sensitive name and on January 7, 1918, at the Grand Theater in Tiffin, Ohio, he made his first appearance as "Blackstone, World's Master Magician."

During the next decade he became one of the best-known magicians in America. The speed and flash of his performing style were just what The Roaring Twenties ordered and important bookings flowed in.

His show had crisscrossed Michigan many times since the start of his career and in 1926 it was in Michigan, at the pleasant, secluded village of Colon, in St. Joseph County, where he purchased some 208 acres of woods, fields, and beachfront property on Sturgeon Lake. It would be his headquarters, workshop, and, as it turned out, the most "permanent" home of his peripatetic life. Here he and his company of performers could relax each summer, and from here every season for the next 24 years the Blackstone Magic Show set forth on its annual journey to entertain, baffle and delight U.S. and Canadian audiences from coast to coast.

In 1927 Harry invited to Colon a visitor who was to have a further impact upon the place of Michigan in the world of magic. Percy Abbott, an Australian wizard, came to fish, stayed to help form The Blackstone Magic Company, and when that dissolved, carried on by himself. Today Abbott's Magic Manufacturing Company of Colon, Michigan, is the largest such enterprise--anywhere. Abbott died some years ago but the firm continues to supply tricks of the trade to conjurers throughout the world and yearly hosts the nation's biggest convention of prestidigitators.

Harry met the Great Depression of the 1930s head-on, with a cut-down one hour version of the big two-and-a-half-hour full evening show, playing three and four a day between films at movie theaters. The same June of 1934 in which he was named "King of Magicians" at a conclave in Detroit saw the birth, in Three Rivers, Michigan, of son and heir, Harry Blackstone, Jr.

When World War 11 came along, the Blackstone Show was the first to entertain servicemen throughout the land for the newly-organized USO Camp Shows. The long tour was a grueling one but after the war the Blackstone Show was more popular than ever. The glory years of the late 1940s saw the show at its height of success; but the bonanza was not to last. Television killed live show business, and in 1950 Blackstone's big show, the "Show of 1001 Wonders," the show which required a jam-packed double-length railroad baggage car to transport it around the country, made its last trip back to Michigan.

With characteristic optimism Harry mounted a smaller, lighter show with fewer people and toured again. But in April of 1955, plagued by poor health and dwindling box office receipts, he left the road for good.

He had performed continuously for half a century and magic was his life. Happily, his last years were spent serenely at The Magic Castle, a private club for magicians in Hollywood, California. Here, just a few blocks from his residence, he could come each evening to visit, greet throngs of friends and admirers, do tricks for hours on end, and enjoy the adulation due the Last of the Big Time Magicians.

He died in Hollywood on November 16, 1965, at the age of eighty. A few days later his ashes were interred at Lakeside Cemetery, just across the water from his old home at Colon, Michigan.

When Harry Blackstone stepped onto the stage you knew you were in the presence of "A Magician." Striding in, shoulders thrown back, arms thrust slightly outward from his sides, elbows bent, his sturdy hands poised as though ready to grapple with unseen forces, he seized the imagination instantly. And when he stood center stage, erect as a pillar, his great white head of hair glowing in the spotlight, a sudden smile of pleasure passing over his face as the gloves which he briskly tossed into the air turned into a fluttering dove before your very eyes--at that moment there was no doubt in your mind that you would relax and be assured of enchantment. Nor was there any fear, as the sonorous, good-humored voice rose without electronic amplification to the last row of the uppermost balcony, that you would have to strain to help lift the dusty cares of life away. You could give yourself over to the astonishment, laughter, awe and delight which lay ahead as horses vanished, princesses floated, handkerchiefs danced, gorgeous girls were buzz-sawed in half, birdcages disappeared from your own fingertips, and people, rabbits, flowers, ducks, burros, bottles, and silken shawls appeared from nowhere, behaved in incredible ways, underwent breathtaking transformations, or vanished completely from human sight in the twinkling of an eye. You were in good hands. You would leave the theater refreshed, full of wonder, and wholly satisfied.

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